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# THEORETICAL AFFLICTIONS: POOR RICH WHITE FOLKS PLAY THE BLUES

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*Lynne Segal*

And suddenly out of this seething cauldron, two planes fly into what is the most obvious symbol that any Hollywood producer could ever have selected to symbolise global capitalism at work and play – the twin towers of the World Trade Center. And we say, hands on our hearts, ‘we don’t know where they came from. They seemed to come out of a clear blue sky ...’

Stuart Hall<sup>1</sup>

1. Stuart Hall, ‘The New World Disorder’, *Soundings*, 19 (2001-2), 15.

At last, it has happened. The tiresome 1990s have come to a close. For better, and certainly also for worse, something different is replacing the most politically tedious decade in living memory. Hundreds of thousands of demonstrators in the richer countries of the world take to the streets once again, pursuing a variety political agendas, while a few academic antagonists try to re-learn how to unite and face up to something beyond their own world-weariness: to confront what Hall refers to as ‘the new reality of the world as a whole’, one where ‘the spectacle of wealth on the one hand and destitution on the other drives people crazy’.<sup>2</sup> Decades are never simply chronological, serving instead as powerful metaphors for their most salient social, economic, political and moral challenges or, in these years, the lack of them. John Major proved one of the most dispiriting prime ministers to preside at Westminster, triggering neither admiration nor aggression, as opponents waited patiently for our all too newly-baked Labour government to be elected. Bill Clinton quickly became a bitter disappointment for many Democrats who had so eagerly celebrated his election to the White House. Indeed, with only the most meagre resistance, the Clinton years proved a mere interregnum between the barely stalled Bush regency heading up the militaristic, neo-liberal, predominantly Christian fundamentalist far Right in control of the USA, stewarding ever deepening social inequalities within its own population, while enforcing global trade agreements ensuring even greater inequalities worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

2. Ibid., p14. On old enemies uniting, see my commentary, Lynne Segal, ‘Jews in the Culture Wars’, *Radical Philosophy*, 116 (2002), 2-6.

3. Peter Gowan, *The Global Gamble*, London, Verso, 1999; Leo Panitch, ‘The New Imperial State’, *New Left Review*, 2 (2000), 5-20.

## MOURNING AND MELANCHOLIA

The era of widespread trade union mobilisation and expanding social movements during the 1970s gave way to increasingly sporadic and fragmented political struggles in the following decade. By the close of the 1980s, little seemed to remain but the insatiable profit-seeking force of global

capitalism, following the pacification of class struggle, tireless ideological assault on Keynesian social democracy and its belief in public planning, all rendered emblematic with the final collapse of the USSR and its satellites. 'The only new Worlds still to be discovered in the 1990s', as historian Mark Mazower suggests, 'lay in the past'.<sup>4</sup> In place of political ideals and collective action, mourning and melancholia have never been more popular than they became in the 1990s. 'The past is simply selling better than the future', Andreas Huyssen argued, puzzling over the ways in which memory itself had become 'a cultural obsession of monumental proportions'.<sup>5</sup>

This was certainly the increasingly consolidated outlook of many Left intellectuals facing the new millennium, backs resolutely turned on the wreckage of their passions and pursuits of yesteryear. The 'short' twentieth century (1914-1989), in Hobsbawm's Olympian survey of the 'Western' world, had moved with astonishing speed. The desolation and barbarism of two World Wars, Hitler, the Holocaust and Stalinism in its first half was followed by a Golden Age of rising hopes, accompanying the welfare and liberal reforms that generated all manner of freedom movements across the world in its second half, only to end with so many aspirations comprehensively crushed at its close. Indeed, rising inequality, ethnic strife and military manoeuvres brought back much of the threat and horror with which the century had begun, as clashing fundamentalisms emerged alongside the fiercest market-driven penetration of every pocket of time and space by American-led, Western corporate capital, now uniquely hegemonic. Whether surveying the remains of the Left, the fate of feminism, or providing other narratives of decline in the 1990s, the main disputes concerned just how terminal the mutilation of once cherished ideals would prove – from whatever standpoint the aggrieved appraisal emanated. In evasive or defensive flight from all that seemed lost, modish academic forums and critical reflection increasingly retreated from political concerns to more personal issues of 'identity' and belonging, with the social conjured up, if at all, primarily in the ethical or aesthetic domain.

From the Right, powerful backlash movements resisting the new sexual freedoms, feminism and women's economic independence (on the rise from the 1960s) had been mourning immorality, divorce and 'fatherlessness', now seen as the root of crime, educational failure, teenage pregnancy and all manner of other social harms. True to the spirit of conservatism, of course, there was nothing new here, except in the fact that women are portrayed playing a more autonomous role as blameworthy agents, rather than seen as mere foolish or contemptible victims. Prototypical warnings, like those coming from US cultural pundit John Prodhoretz in 1996, could have been issued at any time through the ages, proclaiming 'the ominous sense we all have that Americans are, with every intake of breath, unconsciously inhaling a philosophy that stresses individual pleasure over individual responsibility; that our capacity to be our best selves is weakening'.<sup>6</sup> Looking back over the last thirty years, Melanie Heath and Judy Stacey

4. Mark Mazower, *Dark Continent: Europe's Twentieth Century*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1998, p357.

5. Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia*, London, Routledge, 1995, p5.

6. Quoted in Joan Didion, 'Clinton Agonistes', *Political Fictions*, New York, Vintage, 2001, p245.

7. Melanie Heath & J. Stacey.  
 'Transatlantic family travail: review essay'  
*American Journal of Sociology*,  
 forthcoming.

note that wars over marriage and family life in the USA have now begun to outlast even the most stable marriages. This both despite and also because of the pro-marriage ideology dominating US public policy for over two decades: 'Indeed, the Clinton presidency performed crucial spadework for the Bush administration's full-scale effort to promote marriage rather than welfare as a remedy for poverty'.<sup>7</sup>

Coming from the Left or coming from the Right, such sorrows need their scapegoats, and errors and omissions are heaped upon one back or another; accuser pointing accusingly at accuser, for starting the rot. The somewhat misplaced crankiness of much of this political unravelling, at least on the Left, gripped me again reading the essay I alighted upon when preparing my thoughts on the 1990s, entitled 'Resisting Left Melancholia'. It was written by the engaging and erudite North American feminist theorist, Wendy Brown, as one of the opening essays in the *estschrift* for Stuart Hall, *Without Guarantees*. But far from *resisting* Left melancholia and the flight from useful political engagement, as she hopes to do, her analysis is primarily one castigating the mistaken attachments of others. Appropriately enough, in a celebration of Hall's work, she offers a firm defence of the cultural in political analysis. I have no quarrel with that. But in this essay Brown deploys psychoanalytic categories, supposedly via Walter Benjamin (who coined the term 'Left melancholia', although it had little to do with any notions of the Freudian unconscious) to analyse what she sees as the putatively ever more pronounced and pernicious traditionalism of the contemporary Left.

The Left (presented here in singular mode, no hints of looser couplings) is reproved for retaining a narcissistic and futile idealisation of an obsolete vision of politics, via the projection of unconscious aggression onto 'post-structuralism', 'post-modernism' and by their embrace of forms of 'identity politics' and 'cultural politics'. This essay is emblematic of my title, 'theoretical afflictions', in that it conspicuously utilises Benjamin to *defend* a position remarkably similar to one his words were so passionately coined to *attack*. In another recurring move, in my view it also misappropriates what is most insightful in psychoanalytic accounts, within their own domain, for more reductive and equivocal political ends.

I suspect that Brown, whose scholarly range unquestionably incorporates the divergent connotation and context of Benjamin's past political attachments, in contrast to her own contemporary theoretical dilemmas, carries on regardless not just because she understandably finds his metaphors so very appealing, but because she has been dragged, probably unwillingly, into the damaging and impoverished political and cultural debates of the 1990s, known as the Culture Wars. On this terrain, all the weary old antagonists are regrouped for further battle, strictly in the metatheoretical domain: class struggle versus identity politics; scientific explanation versus narrative or aesthetic understanding; material investigation versus semiotic analysis.

Brown kicks off this particular action replay under an apparent

Benjaminian flag, selected from his high Leninist phase, when he was busy haranguing the poet Erich Kastner and his kind for their cultural pretensions, for personifying an intellectual formation which has 'little to do with the labour movement', which is 'remote from the process of production' and does not function to build political parties. Representing mere cliques and fashions, Benjamin derides such mourning and melancholy as mere 'tortured stupidity': 'Their beat very precisely follows the notes according to which poor rich folk play the blues; they correspond to the mournfulness of the satiated man who can no longer devote his money to his stomach'.<sup>8</sup> He wanted them instead to attend to the poetry of that steadfastly single-minded cultural materialist Bertolt Brecht, for whom socialism was simple, and had a great deal to do with the economy and the sharing of material goods. Certainly, it may well be that it is not really so peculiar that Benjamin in 1931 should himself be applauding all that Brown now uses him to attack (in *her* words, the Left is guilty of 'an insistence on a materialism that refuses the importance of the subject and the subjective, the question of style, the problem of language'), and to scorn much that Brown herself might be seen to represent (in *his* words 'the metamorphosis of political struggle from a compulsory decision into an object of pleasure, from a means of production into an article of consumption').<sup>9</sup> But, she might at least acknowledge the irony of her own inversion of her framing text, rather than, as she appears to, rely upon our ignorance of her source material.

The psychoanalytic reading of disagreements and denunciations on the Left is irritating for other reasons. There are simpler ways of explaining Left sectarianism, particularly when its epicentre lies within the academy, as in the contemporary Culture Wars. The generalisation of psychoanalytic insights into the cultural and political domain is not intrinsically frivolous. On the contrary, the social is psychically invested, with unconscious structures of fantasy operating between groups of people as well as between individuals. Confronted with the cruel intensities and uncontrolled rage often witnessed in the horrors of 'racial' hatred (with their murderously, fear-laden projections onto abjected others) or the tenacity of misogyny and irrational fear of female power (held responsible for men's lack of authority and achievement, even when women as a group remain socially and culturally firmly subordinate) we have compelling reasons to suspect that unconscious structures are at work. However, it seems to me to reduce the seriousness of psychoanalytic reflection, indeed itself to serve as an evasion of useful analysis, when deployed to explain positions probably better seen as more superficial 'turf battles', rivalry between peers competing for institutional funding, academic prestige or media attention. Then it becomes more a question of scholarly fashion – the search for stylishness, so deplored by Benjamin.

Wendy Brown was herself drawn into the heart of this toxic terrain at the close of the 1990s, sponsoring a workshop on 'Left Conservatism' at the

8. Walter Benjamin, 'Left Melancholia', in Kaes et al (eds), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, A., Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994, pp306, 305 and 306.

9. Wendy Brown, 'Resisting Left Melancholia', in Paul Gilroy et al (eds), *Without Guarantees: In Honour of Stuart Hall*, London, Verso, 2000 p25; Benjamin, *op. cit.*, p305.

University of California (Santa Cruz) in 1998, advertised in a flyer with the clichéd formulation: 'A spectre is haunting US intellectual life: the spectre of Left Conservatism'. This was part of the fall-out of the hoaxing of the cultural studies journal, *Social Text*, by Alan Sokal, a New York scientist, aiming to defend the 'real' Left, engaged with 'real' issues, against a new elite of pseudo-leftist academics, most prominent in Cultural Studies. In fact, as a tenured physicist, Sokal's actual rivals for the academic prestige and funding he might once have enjoyed comes not from Cultural Studies (the National Endowment for the Humanities in the US gives a mere \$150 million to universities) but from the new Gods of Science, molecular biologists, who receive the public acclaim and the billions once reserved for nuclear physics and weapons research (the National Institute of Health, responsible for biomedical research, soared to \$18 billion - an increase of over 400 per cent in two decades).<sup>10</sup> For very good reasons some scientists, like many at the Harvard University Medical School, have themselves questioned the extraordinary funds spent on the Human Genome Project, with its largely pointless sequencing of the genetic make-up of human chromosomes - 95 per cent of which are known as 'junk material' with no behavioural outcomes.<sup>11</sup> But media attention, like that of the populist academic journal *Lingua Franca* (sponsoring Sokal), had a different, more populist agenda.

## WARS IN THE ACADEMY

The 1980s and 1990s had already turned out to be particularly embattled decades in the realm of higher education. These were the decades, of course, when women, ethnic minorities and other cultural dissenters, hitherto either marginalised or themselves the object of interrogation in the production of knowledge, began to join the interrogators in the wake of the new social movements of the previous decades. Their whole *raison d'être* was to challenge traditional canons, to insist upon their own distinctive cultural and research agendas, beyond the contours of existing disciplines. In the beginning, therefore, conflicts emerged between those defending traditional perspectives and the new recruits eager for change, but they soon widened. Exemplary of the process, the multifaceted analytic, personal and political agenda constituting Women's and Gender Studies fed disputes within and beyond its borders. As their influence waxed and waned, gender theorists inspired new cutting edge erudition by the 1990s, promoting the self-fashioning of putative sexual outlaws (whether diversely dissident or merely 'queer' in a Sedgwickian sort of way) rendering woman's bodies, as Lorna Sage commented, 'less a secret garden than a public thoroughfare scrawled over with slogans'.<sup>12</sup> Some queer theorists for a while held at bay the gloom of other progressive radicals, gleefully displacing binaries to dislodge what they interpreted as the hopes of their ludic feminist champion, Judith Butler, making gender trouble to undermine the melancholic charade of the

10. See Daniel Greenberg, *Science, Money and Politics: Political Triumph and Ethical Erosion*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2001.

11. For fuller discussion, see Lynne Segal, *Why Feminism? Gender, Psychology, Politics*, Oxford, Polity Press, 1999, Chapter 3; and Steven Rose, *Lifelines, Biology, Freedom, Determinism*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1997.

12. Lorna Sage, *Moments of Truth: Twelve Twentieth-Century Women Writers*, London, Fourth Estate, 2001, p165.

'heterosexual matrix'. But as the Culture Wars diversified disputes over the significance and impact of feminist and queer scholarship were soon joined by broader attacks upon and within the academy.

In addition to attacking the new radicals for undermining the prestige and privileges of traditional domestic arrangements, conservative scholars and media voices were busy denouncing them as well for encouraging the 'dependency' cultures of welfare and offering false dreams of general equality and prosperity. But antagonism was strengthening between different dissident groups themselves, weakening their resistance to such attacks. Surprisingly, so it might seem, just when massive public spending and promotion was accruing to many areas of science, its leading advocates used their platforms in the 1990s to mourn the fact that we live in a culture where science is *not* treated with respect. They saw it diminished and distorted by the fashionable literary and cultural elite now presiding in the academy. C.P. Snow's lament from 1959, criticising the literary disdain for 'the men with the future in their bones' resurfaced ever more publicly throughout the 1990s.<sup>13</sup> Assaulting the current academic situation, Paul Gross and Norman Leavitt published *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science* in 1994, accompanied by much public fanfare. They argued that the relativism of social constructionism and fashionable post-modernism, combined with the rise of cultural studies and the attacks of feminist, anti-racist and environmentalist critics, had undermined the authority of science in the universities.<sup>14</sup> In agreement, the New York Academy of Sciences hosted a conference the following year, 'The Flight from Science and Reason'. That same year, the illustrious North American space scientist, Carl Sagan, writing just before his death, saw the flame of science waning, spluttering like 'a Candle in the Dark' in a 'Demon-Haunted World'.<sup>15</sup>

This was the year when the Left-leaning American physicist, Alan Sokal, as we've seen, fed the public chorus of disapproval of many intellectuals with his hoax, designed to mock the questioning of empiricism and truth by cultural theorists, in their defence of cultural relativities.<sup>16</sup> Sokal's blast was assisted and promoted by some feminist scholars, annoyed by the glamour surrounding some feminist theorists inside the academy compared with the neglect accorded others supporting women's struggles outside it. The following year, this overheated account of the dangerous impact of poststructuralism, deconstruction and postmodernism, undermining the social sciences with 'fashionable nonsense and word games' had spread well beyond the US as Sokal joined forces with the French physicist Jean Bricmont to publish *Intellectual Impostures* (1997).<sup>17</sup> Two of Britain's best-known scientists, Lewis Wolpert and Richard Dawkins, pursued similar battles here: the former to protect the universal precepts of science from the follies of other discourses, 'there being only one correct explanation for any observed phenomenon'; the latter (inverting the lament of Auden when finding himself in the company of scientists) to declare he is made to 'feel like

13. C.P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: A Second Look*, New York, Mentor, 1964.

14. Paul Gross and Norman Leavitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and its Quarrels with Science*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1994, p252.

15. Carl Sagan, *The Demon-Haunted World: Science as a Candle in the Dark*, New York, Random House, 1995.

16. Alan D. Sokal, 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity', *Social Text*, 46-47 (1996), 217-52.

17. Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont, *Intellectual Impostures*, London, Profile Books, 1998, p193.

18. Lewis Wolpert, *The Unnatural Nature of Science: Why Science Does Not Make Common Sense*, London, Faber and Faber, 1992; and Richard Dawkins *Unweaving the Rainbow*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1998, p29.

19. Speaking to T.S. Klepp, 'Every Man a Philosopher King', *New York Times Magazine*, 2.12.1990, p57.

20. Martha Nussbaum: 'The hip defeatism of Judith Butler: The Professor of Parody', *The New Republic*, 22.02.1999, pp37 and 44.

21. Charles Derber, et al, *Power in the Highest Degree: Professionals and the Rise of a New Mandarin Order*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1990.

22. Roger Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics has Corrupted our Higher Education*, New York, Harper, 1990.

23. Michael Ignatieff, 'Where Are They Now?', *Prospect* (1997), p8.

24. Richard A. Posner, *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 2002.

shabby curates among literary dukes'.<sup>18</sup>

Academics with access to the media often seemed eager to join in hostilities as fifth columnists, attacking their own side. The philosophical ironist, Richard Rorty, began the decade lashing out at his specialist team in the *New York Times*, 'philosophy, as traditionally conceived, is an empty and obsolete game that might as well be called off'.<sup>19</sup> By the close of the decade, feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum had accepted a platform in the conservative US journal, the *New Republic*, to denounce the theoretical obscurity and 'hip defeatism' of fellow feminist philosopher, Judith Butler, in defence of the common sense empiricism of those attending to 'real women' in 'real struggles'.<sup>20</sup> Some academics lamented the rise of a strictly professionalised intellectual managerial class,<sup>21</sup> others berated its opposite, the corruption of higher education by 'tenured radicals' moving the teachings of the barricades into the universities.<sup>22</sup> Like the Canadian historian Michael Ignatieff, several more comprehensively deplored 'the death of the intellectual' as creating a void in public life.<sup>23</sup> The one theme uniting the sundry critics of academia was the narrative of intellectual decline. The guns are still firing today, a recent contribution from New York judge and legal academic, Richard Posner, accusing intellectuals (as usual, excluding himself) of providing ill-informed and irrelevant commentary, from over-specialised academic domains.<sup>24</sup>

## POLITICS OF CULTURE, CULTURE OF POLITICS

Entering such academic warfare, whether weighed down with the theoretical abstractions of critical theory or buoyed up with the axiomatic certainties of empiricism, has hardly brought out the best in any of its participants. Richer understanding of culture, politics or, indeed, the nature of any form of knowledge, is poorly served by any analytic framework that poses one configuration against another – given the intricate entanglement of them all. The imbroglia itself underlines the lassitude of the decade, as intellectuals engaged in vicious assaults upon each other, and academic work – along with much else in the public domain not wholly accountable to commercial markets – became the butt of populist and government attack. The first thing to note about the various stand-offs throughout the 1990s is the political futility of championing any one side in the Culture Wars against the other. On the one hand, economic realities and the shifting fortunes of vulnerable people are everywhere enmeshed within signifying practices, that is, within cultural understandings that legitimise the hierarchies, inclusions and exclusions they reflect and inscribe. On the other hand, organised political struggle, of whatever sort, always invokes collective identities and interests, whether challenging exploitative economic practices, legal discriminations or the oppressive symbolic processes implanting and maintaining cultural marginalisation, disparagement, restraint and exclusion.



Outside academia, the 1990s had begun with the Left already starkly polarised. In Britain this followed a sustained assault on its outmoded practices throughout the 1980s launched by the magazine of the British Communist Party, *Marxism Today*. The journal had portrayed 'the Left' as hopelessly out of date, whether situated in the labour movement, Labour Party or organised Left groups (although apparently excluding itself from the critique). *Marxism Today* drew upon the writings of Laclau and Mouffe, with their 'modernized' reconstruction of Gramsci, to berate the Left for a politics that continued to prioritise the ontological centrality of class. In contrast, Laclau and Mouffe refused to give centrality to any particular site of struggle, seeing all oppositional groups as irreducibly unstable and plural in nature, necessitating the most complex negotiations of equivalence through the recognition of difference.<sup>25</sup> Yet, while apparently now sympathetic to the theoretical analysis coming from feminism and other autonomous struggles, the non-aligned Left were never prominent in the pages of *Marxism Today*. As its leading light Stuart Hall would later reflect, this was because 'with a few exceptions [the magazine] didn't then take the social movements very seriously'.<sup>26</sup> *Marxism Today's* legacy remained as powerfully influential as it was contentious well after its demise, in the early 1990s. Its relentless rebuking of the Left in support of the affirmation of fluid and multiplying identities and differences aligned it, unsurprisingly, with the dominant notions of Cultural Studies and deconstruction. Its critics saw it as contributing to the further demoralisation of a Left, already at the weakest it had been for many decades. Some, myself included, found it galling that sections of the 'old' Left should apparently finally fully embrace ideas of the equivalence of all oppositional formations, precisely when the new social movements had become organisationally weak, their impact dwindling and dispersed.<sup>27</sup>

However, even for those who knew they wanted to avoid the polarisations of the Culture Wars, as well as the sectarian struggles waged between many Left groups, it was becoming harder to avoid confusion and uncertainty over the relation between culture and politics. The theoretical ambitions of a now institutionalised Cultural Studies, still hoping to be cutting edge, bumped up against the strategic challenges of cultural disillusion in the possibility of any overall political improvement. Raymond Williams (the man who helped invent Cultural Studies) notoriously complained in 1979: 'Culture ... the number of times I've wished that I had never heard of the damned word'.<sup>28</sup> With every leap of theoretical sophistication, the cunning allure of the 'cultural', alongside a stylish evasion of the 'economic', when analysing relations of power, set fresh snares for the politically attentive.

Having brought Derrida, deconstruction and subaltern studies to the Anglophone world, the latter day diva of Cultural Studies, feminism and postcolonialism, Gayatri Spivak, was expressing little more than despair over their appropriations within these recently academically embedded configurations. Defining 'culture' as 'the word lent to a complex strategic

25. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985; and *Post-Marxism without Apologies*, London, Verso, 1990.

26. Stuart Hall, 'Culture and Power', Interview by Peter Osborne and Lynne Segal, *Radical philosophy*, 86 (1997), 37.

27. See Peter Osborne, 'Radicalism Without limit? Discourse, Democracy and the Politics of identity', in P. Osborne (ed), *Socialism and the Limits of Liberalism*, Verso, London 1991, pp2-1-26; Lynne Segal, 'Whose Left? Socialism, Feminism and the Future', in R. Blackburn (ed), *After the Fall: The Failure of Communism and the Future of Socialism*, Verso, London 1991, pp274-86.

28. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*, London, Verso, 1979, p154.

situation in a particular society', she now saw the use of her notion 'strategic essentialism' to assert identity positions as primarily a shelter for the profoundly individualistic, nationalist traditions of US culture: 'It's part of radical chic, because the well-placed migrant community, the so-called hyphenated Americans, the real culture-wallas, think that what's happening to them is basically what's happening'.<sup>29</sup> Criticising the failure to prioritise institutional sites of cultural agency, Spivak was one of the first to call for a 'transnational cultural studies': an approach which could understand the ways in which the reduction of politics to respect for the recognition of cultural diversity and difference was now itself doing the work of promoting US led, corporate capitalist interests in the new 'financialisation' of the world. 'There is space for a reconstellation of the Marxist project here', she added, one which (in contrast to that of Laclau and Mouffe) analyses the neo-colonial situation as one where systematic economic restructuring, international subcontracting and new forms of super-exploitation of women are thwarting any hopes for justice under capitalism in an intensified North-South divide.<sup>30</sup>

In a somewhat similar vein, Edward Said pointed to the problems which emerged when 'French' theory was transported from its European root, propounded by academics originally confronting large Marxist movements and far greater engagement with the state, to the very different context of the USA, where scholars were far more detached from Marxist thought or any involvement in state institutions. Furthermore, he argued, 'the marginalization, the ghettoization, the reification of the Arab, through orientalism and other processes, cannot be answered by simple assertion of ethnic particularity'.<sup>31</sup> Even more trenchantly, Aijaz Ahmad insisted that the promotion of multiple identities in the 'community of difference' had become a key strategy of the new global capitalist order, tied to a market eager to service people's avid need for signs of authenticity, on the one hand, while working to dilute 'the very grain of politics – which today's culturalism suppresses', on the other hand.<sup>32</sup> The criticism these writers were elaborating a decade ago is closer to the agenda now outlined in the perspectives of many currently attempting to move beyond the deadlocked polarities dominating debate in the 1990s. As more critical cultural theorists were themselves eager to emphasise by the end of that decade, beginning to theorise the cultural economy of globalisation ('globalization is ordinary'), the point to make is not simply that the cultural industries service global economic exchange at every level, but also that an emphasis on 'difference' and 'diversity' is now promoted rather than suppressed in the international arena of capitalism. But it is only certain 'common differences' that are recognised, others are still determinedly suppressed.<sup>33</sup>

There was then some 'return to economics' in Cultural Studies in the late nineties, with a new emphasis on production alongside consumption, on social context as well as hermeneutics, even a move 'back to reality'. Yet, some of the morbid symptoms of the decade remained.<sup>34</sup> Whether in the upmarket media, in educational or political forums, Cultural Studies had

29. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (*Radical Philosophy* interview), 'Setting to Work (Transnational Cultural Studies)', in Peter Osborne (ed), *A Critical Sense*, London Routledge, 1996, p166.

30. Ibid., pp168-169.

31. Edward Said, 'Orientalism and After' (*Radical Philosophy* interview), in ibid., pp78 and 166.

32. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Postcolonialism: What's in a name?' in Roman De la Campa and E. Ann Kaplan (eds), *Late Imperial Culture*, London, Verso, 1995, p1.

33. See Kevin Robbins, 'What in the World is Going On?', in Paul du Gay (ed), *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production*, Sage, London, 1997; and John Krniauskas, 'Globalization is Ordinary: The Transnationalization of Cultural Studies', *Radical Philosophy* 90 (1998), pp9-20.

34. Paul du Gay (ed), *Production of Culture/Cultures of Production*, London, Sage, 1997; and Angela McRobbie, *Back to Reality: Social Experience and Cultural Studies*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1997.

become the constant butt of derision – primarily because of rather than despite its success – dismissed as intellectually frivolous, abstruse, an obstacle to useful or uplifting knowledge and a waste of educational resources. The crucial work it had fostered for several decades overcoming the historic blindness to much of the terrain of gender, race and other forms of systemic oppression within the cultures of modernity, its decisive role in opening up possibilities for far richer communication between disciplines, was being forgotten in a new form of contemporary amnesia.<sup>35</sup>

In another familiar, perverse move, some of the most fashionable cultural theorists were themselves busy penning grandiloquent attacks upon each other, rather than using their critical insights to reinvigorate richer cultural and political agendas. With his unique brand of idiosyncratic provocation, Slavoj Žižek combined a worship of Hitchcock and Hollywood, Marx and Lacan, with fierce attacks on feminism, race and sexual politics:

So we are fighting our PC battles for the rights of ethnic minorities, of gays and lesbians, of different lifestyles, and so forth, while capitalism pursues its triumphal march – and today’s critical theory, in the guise of ‘cultural studies’, is performing the ultimate service for the unrestrained development of capitalism by actively participating in the ideological effort to make its practices invisible ... political struggle proper is transformed into the cultural struggle for recognition of marginal identities and the tolerance of differences.<sup>36</sup>

On top of impishly insulting his own fans and collaborators for not subordinating their more specific political agendas to class struggle, Žižek offends more traditional activists by proudly cementing his ‘dogmatic Lacanianism’ to a Hegelian critique of Marx, replacing any concrete strategic role for class (or any other) struggle with the more enigmatic notion of its role in the service of ‘absolute negativity’.<sup>37</sup> Such metaphysical excess, one can be sure, is hardly the soil that will renew any cultural or political agenda beyond the lecture podium.

That the worst type of sumptuously but empty rhetorical abstraction, posing as political analysis, remains alive in more than one of the doyens of cultural studies can be seen in the recent spate of books on the 11 September attacks, coming from Britain’s leading left publisher, Verso Books. As Peter Osborne notes sharply, these texts display the worst forms of conflation of levels of cultural and political analysis without any attempt to place their interpretations within a plausible global history, thereby displacing ‘the political burden from the content of their analyses onto their mode of address: an enactment of conceptual opposition to each and every status quo’.<sup>38</sup> For Jean Baudrillard, deliberately trying to match the outrageousness of the event with the outrageousness of his commentary, the event brought out the terrorist in us all, while creating the impression that the twin towers ‘were responding to the suicide of the suicide-planes with their own suicides

35. See Bill Schwarz, ‘Poetics: a Polemic’, Jose Pacheco (ed), *Theory and Culture: Essays In The Sociology of Culture*, Lund, University of Lund Press, 2000, who compellingly defends Cultural Studies against what he calls the ‘historical amnesia’ which he finds trivialising and distorting much of the work which has been done, and is currently pursued, under its rubric.

36. Slavoj Žižek, *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political*, London, Verso, 1999, p218.

37. Ibid.

38. Peter Osborne, ‘Interpreting the World: September 11, cultural criticism and the Intellectual Left’, *Radical Philosophy*, 117 (2003), 3.

39. Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism and Requiem for the Twin Towers*, London, Verso, 2002, pp7-8.

40. Paul Virilio, *Ground Zero*, London, Verso, 2002, p37.

41. Slavoj Zizek, *Welcome to the desert of the real: Five essays on September 11 and Related Dates*, London, Verso, p142.

42. Ibid., pp75 and 30.

43. Natasha Walter, *What is the New Feminism?* London, Little Brown, 1998, p4.

44. See Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, London, Routledge, 1988.

... [as the West] has become suicidal, and declared war on itself'.<sup>39</sup> For Paul Virilio, the world is now 'united beyond *good* and *evil* by the inauthenticity now shared by broadcasters in East and West'.<sup>40</sup> For Zizek, the effect of the attack was 'to (re)introduce the dimension of absolute negativity into our daily lives'.<sup>41</sup> We learn nothing about the specificity of the current global context, nor detect a glimmer of any forms of practical oppositional political action from any of them. On the contrary, as from Zizek, we attract only the spray of his contempt for 'Leftist follies', hailed by him as 'the repellent figure of the comfortable, well paid English or French radical Leftist', already identified with 'the dirty obscene underside of Power'.<sup>42</sup>

Elsewhere, I have argued that it was once feminism, the *bête noire* of these particular cultural theorists, which worked hardest to promote new forms of radical cultural politics. But its radical spirit had also long since waned by the 1990s. Here too a new breed of antinomian feminists were able to launch themselves and court media attention via scathing attacks on other feminists, or breathing fresh life into pedestrian celebrations of male lust and female allure. One of the most successful in this arena was the polemical cultural critic, Camille Paglia, who did – and does – perform both roles with unflagging passion. An expedient feminist sensibility offering banal self-help homily was now part of popular culture, alongside the shallower meritocratic individualism of a type of bland 'new feminism', exemplified in the combination of characteristic chastisement and confident aspirational striving to be found in Natasha Walter. Walter eulogised young women's determined commitment to personal success, while blaming feminism for failing to eliminate inequity in women's lives (this time through its inappropriate focus on 'sexual politics and culture'), while herself evading any serious analysis of the cultural and political forces which might be keeping women subordinate.<sup>43</sup> It is just such a feminism of individual growth, devoid of critical edge, which has been selectively mainstreamed to service neo-liberal values today. It is appropriated by a managerial elite, eager to roll back welfare for workfare, holding every individual accountable for their own fate, however systemic or collectively specific their privations, problems or protests. It is also the adjustable women's rights feminism invoked with false piety as proof of Western post-colonial authority, recently most egregiously displayed in George Bush's sudden conversion to it as justification for military action in Afghanistan.<sup>44</sup>

Yet even as historical amnesia works here also to erase other legacies of feminism, its more radical residue lingers for those who wish to find it.

## MIDNIGHT SALVAGE

One certain thing about the academic and media battles over knowledge, culture and politics waged throughout the nineties was that their casualties were figural. Loose talk of the Real (or the hyperreal) did not cost lives. Its critics are right to believe that its level of abstraction kept it detached from

political engagement, where, as we saw above, some of its celebrity theorists remain. However, the literal return of planned collective killing in the metaphorical heart of the Western world on 11 September, ushering in (as was clearly intended) massive US-led Western retaliation against targets in the 'Islamic' world, has refocused the mind of many intellectuals on the necessity for more immediate political responses to actual and planned devastation. (Even though, dare one admit it, for all its merciless brutality, the casualty list on that day in the USA was relatively small compared to the collective slaughter we have witnessed constantly around the world over the last decade, from ex-Yugoslavia to Chechnya or Rwanda.) Determined attempts to encompass the totality of the current situation, nationally and internationally, are flooding back. Despite the supposed 'decline' of nation states, we quickly learn, the dangers we all face in this new epoch is one in which a single nation state wields greater imperial power than has ever been seen before in human history, with 11 September serving as a catalyst for more aggressive control over any other even potentially refractory nation state. Moreover, for the moment, it does so without an even putative effective opposing force, in contrast with the global situation post-1945, when the USA felt it must win the hearts and minds of other nations in order to combat the growth of the extraordinarily centralised, if highly inefficient, command economy of the 'communist' USSR.

As Francis Mulhern, among others, warns us, 'politics is not coextensive with culture, nor is their relationship stable over time'.<sup>45</sup> All too true. Yet, it is still cultural identifications and belongings that at times draw us into progressive politics (whether as Marxists, mothers or members of trade unions: and usually with as much or as little hope of successfully overturning existing social relations). Just as it is such attachments which can be (as all have been) manipulated to service reactionary, repressive, even the most destructive ends. It is feminist, anti-racist or more specific sexual political agendas, which can be manipulated to sideline and undermine more general struggles for justice within global capitalism. However, far more often, historically, forms of reactionary nationalism, heard today on platforms like that of Pat Buchanan in the USA, are used with huge success to win the support of working class men and women, via the most vicious onslaughts on those from 'alien' cultures, feminists or sexual dissidents. In his historical writing, four decades ago, Edward Thompson set out to narrate the ways in which class has a cultural as well as an economic dimension, lived as forms of experience and identity.<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Alan Sinfield argues that political identity does not derive directly 'from class or gender or racial position, or sexual orientation (or from any theory)': 'It derives', he concludes, 'mainly from involvement in a milieu ... the principal cultural effect, of looking at a picture as much as going to a football match, is the development of group allegiance; of perceived affiliations and breaks'.<sup>47</sup> There is thus little wisdom in posing the economic or political against the cultural, when each conceptual level, though distinct, is also inseparable. This is, of course, why

45. Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture*, London, Routledge, 2000, p124.

46. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1963.

47. Alan Sinfield, 'Middle-class dissidence', *Ideas and Production*, IX and X (1989), 25.

terms like ‘political economy’, ‘cultural politics’, ‘sexual politics’ were introduced in the first place, to encompass the ways in which political consciousness is constituted, consciously and unconsciously, through culture and interpersonal relations.

The point is that conservative mobilisations, however framed, give us no reason to disdain rallying for progressive political ends along the very same lines of attachment. The tension that exists between culture and politics need not mean (though it often has meant) that the one analytic frame necessarily engulfs the other, as Stefan Collini argues criticising Mulhern’s fear that cultural analysis of formations of power always threatens to displace or dissolve any ‘fully political’ solution to them.<sup>48</sup> In progressive contexts, as women’s liberationists found back in the 1970s, political engagement can not only motivate and empower its participants, but also work to encourage the continuous development of solidarities against exploitative and oppressive practices across the broadest of barriers. It does this, obviously, in contexts that foster shared attachment to possible universal visions of a more equal, united and peaceful world – whether driven by struggles against corporate capitalism, ecological concerns or some more spiritual humanitarianism. In *Spaces of Hope*, the radical Marxist geographer David Harvey calls for a renewed optimism of the intellect. He insists, I think correctly, that there is no necessity to polarise particularity against universality, so long as we realise that all universal struggles have quite particular origins and so long as we acknowledge that our universal conceptions are never unchanging or absolute. Widespread political resistance becomes possible whenever the choice to express political solidarity is made visible and concrete, which will always rely upon some imaginative conception of shared humanity. Despite all that we face in this current ideological triumph of neo-liberalism, aspirations to think universally can sustain attempts to remain active as subversive agents ‘with one foot planted in some alternative camp’.<sup>49</sup> Meanwhile, the mere ‘invocation of the *concept* of “politics”’, as Collini again points out, ‘however sophisticated or radical, is not itself politics’.<sup>50</sup>

Embracing universalist aspirations also entails recognition of the importance of personal attachments. Notwithstanding all the cautionary and critical mantras of recent years on the contradictions, ambiguities and instabilities with which any form of identity and belonging are riven, despite knowing that identities which foster hopes for commitment and solidarity also create rankings which silence or exclude others, we still have the very best of reasons to recognise and support people’s relatively non-coerced, relatively non-coercive identifications and attachments. For it is the volatility and fragility of just such attachments in today’s world (one where most of us, much of the time, must defer to the demands and upheavals of market forces) that means we become ever more compulsively driven to consume capitalism’s own flimsy authorisations of authenticity, its marketing of our ever vanishing heritage. We certainly need to think more clearly about both

48. Stefan Collini, ‘Defending Cultural Criticism’, *New Left Review*, 18 (2002), 90. Mulhern (op. cit.), of course, is criticizing what he calls ‘metaculture’, the stubborn determination of many cultural theorists to focus on cultural criticism at the expense of any other economic or social underpinnings of power.

49. David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2000, p238.

50. Collini, ‘Defending Cultural Criticism’, op. cit., p89.

culture and politics, in political cultures that increasingly encourage the take-over of democratic control of national and local government, and all they provide and regulate, by private capital. Nation states are not disappearing, but they are becoming effectively less democratic, as trade agreements allow the interests of global corporations based in the richer nations to wipe out the economies of less developed countries (the devastation of the banana market in the Caribbean in the 1990s providing just one notorious instance).

As most of those currently hoping to find ways of political engagement today are only too well aware, even trying to envisage ways of opposing such predatory market rule will mean drawing upon the imagination and mobilising skills of all possible oppositional and progressive forces, via whatever forms of political pressure can be brought to bear on the seven richest nation states (plus Russia), which make up the G8 countries dominating the IMF and WTO. It was when thousands of people protested against the World Trade Organisation in Seattle, at the close of 1999, installing the anti-corporate capitalist globalisation movement in North America, that greater efforts to regenerate oppositional movements have kept beckoning. Similar actions would soon emerge in expanding numbers across Europe and the UK, its most recent manifestation is the half million marchers appearing on the streets of Florence to protest against US driven militarism and iniquitous trade agreements and the imminent 'war' with Iraq. As Baudrillard argued in his provocative, if little read, polemic 'The Gulf War never happened', the US and its allies do not really wage war nowadays, because the sides are far too uneven: it is more a matter of targeted slaughter.<sup>51</sup>

Rethinking and refining all our conceptual tools and collective actions has always been the imaginative challenge before us, when it is capitalism itself that continually works to accommodate whatever forms of opposition it confronts for its own ends. While political elites mouth post-feminist and neo-liberal feminist rhetoric to further their goals, to take just one familiar example, the spectre of a more politically authentic feminism lives on, always threatening to expose the erasure of those earlier feminist struggles – whether around the workplace, domesticity or access to democratically run, shared community resources. The fact that people are mobilised to fight for better lives though cultural identifications, on the one hand, needs to be understood and kept separate from observing how capitalism attempts to accommodate and contain such struggles, on the other. The salutary lesson of the passing of the 1990s is that its intensified polarisations of identity against class, culture against politics, crystallise problems that have dogged political life for decades. They invoke dilemmas which should long since have diminished, as we find ways to convey that on the conceptual terrain the differing levels of political and cultural analysis, while needing to be theorised autonomously, are at the very same time lived and acted upon always together.

51. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, Sydney, Power Publications, 1995.

Starting over again, while keeping hold of different ways of assessing where we have come from just might, in the words of Adrienne Rich, produce the ‘midnight salvage’ which keeps both passion and politics alive. Rich, whose poetry is always rooted in feminist politics, who registers that ‘capitalism lost no time in re-arranging itself around “feminism”’, who sees that ‘one period’s necessary strategies can mutate into the monsters of a later time’ (calling for a moratorium on her own once favoured words, like the ‘body’), who laments her earlier forms of blindness, yet so stubbornly, still, preserves her oppositional imagination, knowing that it is necessary to be ‘generous to earlier selves, [to] keep faith with the continuity of our journeys’, and the lessons we have learned on ‘what moves other people to change’: ‘A politicized life’, she writes, ‘ought to sharpen both the senses and the memory’.<sup>52</sup>

52. Adrienne Rich, *The Art of the Possible*, New York, Norton, 2001, pp153, 2 and 75.

I hear the same message today coming from some exemplary 1990s feminists, as when listening to Butler recently seeking possibilities for an ‘international feminist coalition’ to think through and act upon the global dilemmas women face. ‘Various routes lead us to politics’, she notes, ‘various stories bring us onto the street, various kinds of reasoning and belief’.<sup>53</sup> Indeed. The philosophical tradition, which propels her global egalitarian, pacifist stance (a politics I share), is not one that will win us all – male or female. It begins, and ends, with the demands of cultural translation, in her words: ‘I am nowhere without you. I cannot muster the “we” except by finding the way in which I am tied to “you”, trying to translate, but finding my own language must break up and yield in order to know you’. Sadly, many will ignore Butler’s demanding art of translation, will not learn, as she sees it, that ‘the human comes into being, again and again, as that which we have yet to know’.<sup>54</sup> But, she can move (as well as frustrate) me, as she does others who project their best selves onto her intellectual aura. From the opposite end of the same feminist spectrum, archetypal 1970s radical, Barbara Ehrenreich, inspires me too. Briefly leaving word play to look after itself, she takes on whatever menial job she can, then writes up her experiences among America’s most exploited female workers with such fiery humour in *Nickel and Dimed* that it became a best-seller in the US – she tells rich tales of poor folk beating back the blues.<sup>55</sup> Facing up to the very bleak opening of the 21st century, means transforming mourning and self-serving rivalries into a richer, more inclusive politics, which might still serve to ignite a wary, if still far from winning, hope.

53. Judith Butler, *Violence, Mourning, Politics: Studies in Gender and Sexuality* (forthcoming).

54. Ibid.

55. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed: Undercover in Low-Wage USA*, London, Granta Books, 2002.